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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000614

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DEPARTMENT FOR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/14/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIANS REMAIN CONCERNED OVER "CREEPING RECOGNITION"

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: On April 11, Minister of Foreign Affairs David Bakradze called in Ambassador Tefft to express Georgia's disappointment with the U.S. decision not to support a Georgian intervention at the OSCE over a Russian request to negotiate the extradition of Russian prisoners in Abkhazia with the de facto authorities there. Incoming Deputy Foreign Minister (and key Saakashvili insider) Giga Bokeria and Georgian Ambassador to the U.S. David Sikkharulidze were also present. After Ambassador Tefft pushed back on the significance of the request, Bakradze explained Georgian concern as the totality of the provocations coming from Russia. Bokeria raised the May 21 Parliamentary elections, noting the progress to date and seeking guidance on next steps. He said there would be no social programs conducted during the campaign, eliminating a source of contention during the Presidential campaign. End summary.

¶2. (C) On April 11, Minister of Foreign Affairs David Bakradze called in Ambassador Tefft to express on record his disappointment with the U.S. decision not to support a Georgian intervention at the OSCE over a Russian MOJ request to negotiate the extradition of Russian prisoners in Abkhazia with the de facto authorities there. Despite admitting the formulation of the letter was mild, Bakradze contended that it was part of a larger "smart" Russian policy to take small steps that would lead to the absorption of Abkhazia into Russia. He worried about the possibility of recognition without a formal statement of recognition. We need to react to small steps today, he said, or we'll have a bigger problem later. Bakradze expressed concern about crossing "a point of irreversibility" and argued that Georgia's position was not one of overreacting but of "preventive reaction." He said Georgia could not agree to Russia's negotiating directly with the de facto authorities as it would mean legitimization of the regime there.

¶3. (C) Ambassador Tefft responded that he reported back Georgia's concern about the letter when it was initially raised with him verbally, but the letter appeared to be more innocuous than initially reported as it asked Georgia's permission to conduct such a negotiation but did not state an intention to take unilateral action against Georgia's territorial integrity by starting one. The U.S. understood the deep concern here, the Ambassador said, but Georgia could not expect the U.S. to jump on Russia every time there is a new piece of evidence; rather Georgia should consider carefully which things are important enough to raise with Russia. Ambassador Tefft stressed that although this incident did not meet the bar, Russia's unilateral lifting of sanctions against Abkhazia did - and the U.S. reacted. He emphasized that this is no change in policy but simply a judgment as to the importance of one particular event.

¶ 4. (C) Bakradze took the point and explained further that Georgia's concern is the totality of the provocations coming from Russia. Bokeria added that Georgia is concerned about the "creeping annexation" of Abkhazia by Russia, of which this and the unilateral lifting of economic and military sanctions is a part. After relaying his Government's appreciation for President Bush's effort's at the Bucharest Summit, Bokeria relayed deep concern that Germany would not offer a Membership Action Plan to Georgia in December - or even at the NATO Summit in 2009 - as a result of information he received from a German CDU foreign policy spokesperson close to Chancellor Merkel. Bokeria asked what Georgia should do in the face of a number of small steps which are accumulating to become recognition in everything but name. Ambassador Tefft said Georgia should not overreact. It needs to be careful not to expect a reaction to every piece of evidence.

¶ 5. (C) Turning to elections, Bokeria reviewed some recent steps, noting that the Central Election Commission was close to final agreement with non-governmental organizations on a code of conduct regarding the use of administrative resources. Importantly, there would be no social programs during the campaign, eliminating a source of contention during the Presidential campaign. The Parliament had also simplified the protocols to make easier the vote count on election day and the CEC had publicized the complaints and appeals process, one of the main recommendations of the OSCE and the OSCE Ambassadorial Working Group. The Ambassador asked about the Ombudsman's claim of having "documentary evidence" of election fraud based on tapes of voting during the Presidential elections. Bokeria said that although there were reportedly some instances of multiple voting, the main issue was two precincts with more than 500 extra votes. He

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said that these precincts were both "special precincts" where votes were dropped into boxes from military barracks, hospitals and other designated sites. For this reason, the actual voters in these precincts were not recorded on the tapes. The Ambassador said Georgia needed to clarify this point publicly.

¶ 6. (C) Comment: The issue of the extradition request - about which the Georgians overreacted - is really part of a larger concern about a perception of increasing Russian annexation of Abkhazia. The implications of the lifting of the sanctions is significant and comes on top of other steps including continued passportization and investment in the region. The Georgians believe that Russia is considering other actions as well in response to the recent Russia Duma hearings. The Georgian response to the extradition request illustrates the deep worry in Tbilisi that they are watching the government lose Abkhazia to a gradual but effective Russian campaign of small steps that increase ties between the Abkhaz and Russia. We will continue to encourage Georgia to reach out to the Abkhaz as a way to counter any such effort. End comment.

TEFFT